

What I Have Learned About Trainee Abuse

After 26 years of active military service in many type Battalions, I can state that none have been more satisfying than my duty in an Advanced Individual Training battalion. Though all units within our Army have their day to day challenges, these type battalions, as well as basic training battalions, have a more unique challenge in that leaders are not dealing with “seasoned soldiers”; we deal more with young adults wanting to become soldiers and seasoned soldiers who sometimes want to be “young adults”.

Trainee abuse, as in any corporation with a multitude of employees, will never be completely erased from the ranks. Only through education and high standards will such occurrences be minimized and managed. I have found that known established standards with a goal of zero tolerance and swift punishment deters abuse.

We think of trainee abuse happening from a Drill Sergeant to a Private but I have discovered more abuse cases within the classroom environment where leaders attempt to put a class in a more relaxed atmosphere to establish better learning methods. This method does have merit but with this atmosphere comes risks. I have witnessed and addressed many forms of abuse but sexual type abuse is the most common within the ranks. Within an AIT Battalion there are many instructors both military and civilian who are very professionally in their duties. There will always be one that will attempt to “challenge the system” and inevitably they will be caught. I have seen that our new soldiers are very honest and with the buddy system and end of course critiques they will almost always tell someone of the incident.

Training and education for our instructors and drill sergeants are our best tools. Our instructors must know that they all are mentors. In many of my briefings and discussions with instructors, discussing mentoring issues with them has brought a realization to the table that these young and future soldiers are our replacements, sons and daughters and will be treated as such. For our Drill Sergeants, I have discussed with them methods of the same. When we think of the “Drill Sergeant”, we think of the older crusty always-yelling type that never has a good moment. This must be the farthest from the fact. In an AIT environment we must continually train the Drill Sergeant to be the “extended mom and dad”, knowing when to scold the soldier but also knowing when to lend an ear, bringing trust and respect to the ranks.

With this type of continual training and discussion I have seen AWOLs drop to nearly nothing and abuse cases drop to only 7 in the last 12 months and of that only 5 abuse cases were substantiated. This after more than 2000 trainees joined the ranks as trained, highly professional soldiers.